

THE CAPITALS OF ARKANSAS: FOLLOW THAT WANDERING STAR!

Today, when we think of Arkansas's capital, the choice is obvious: Little Rock. Yet Little Rock is really the seventh administrative center for Arkansas, or what would one day be the Natural State. These headquarters of government are scattered across the New World and it may be a slight stretch of the imagination to think of some of them as capitals in the modern sense. Nevertheless, it was from these places that official authority over Arkansas issued.

1. Mexico—De Soto's real headquarters.

In 1537 Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was also king of Spain, named Hernando de Soto Governor-General of Cuba and Florida. This title reflected royal expectations: de Soto was to explore, colonize and exploit the largely unknown land of Florida. He would claim it and conquer it in the name of the King of Spain, and expected it to be rich in gold and other minerals, perhaps as rich as Peru.

In May 1539 de Soto sailed from Habana, Cuba, for Florida with a force of about 600. For four years, de Soto and his soldiers explored some 906,000 sq km. (350,000 sq mi.) in what is now the southeastern United States of America. They went as far west as Texas and as far north as the northern boundary of Arkansas. In May 1541 they became the first Europeans to see the Mississippi River, probably near the site of Memphis, Tennessee, then crossed into what would become the Territory, then State of Arkansas. For most of a year de Soto led his men through the prairies, swamps and hill country of Arkansas. In the spring he returned they returned to the banks of the Mississippi, where de Soto died of a fever on May 21. His aide, Luis de Moscoso, sank de Soto's body in the river to keep his death a secret.

Although de Soto had sailed from Habana, this important port city was not the "capital" of Cuba. The first-founded Spanish settlement of Baracoa was the administrative center for the island but true authority lay elsewhere. Until 1535, Spanish America was administered by the royal authorities on the island of Hispaniola (today's Santo Domingo and Haiti) but in that year, the office of Viceroy was established in Mexico, shifting the seat of royal authority. As Governor-General, de Soto ultimately answered to the Viceroy in Mexico, as well as to investigations periodically conducted by royal agents.

2. *Quebec City – From here, La Salle floated forth.*

France's New World presence began its expansion in 1504, when French fishermen first cruised the waters off of the coast of Newfoundland. In 1524, Italian explorer Giovanni de Verazzano, sailing on orders of King Louis of France, explored the east coast of North America from the Carolinas to Newfoundland, naming the land "Francesca." On a map prepared by his brother, the territory was dubbed "New France." By the end of the century exploration and settlement had begun in earnest; in 1608, soldier of fortune Samuel de Champlain established a settlement, which he named Québec. This settlement became the administrative center of the colony of New France; the royal governor's residence was located there, as was the main garrison of French soldiers. By the 1680s, when La Salle voyaged down the Mississippi River and claimed much land (including today's Arkansas) for the French crown, Québec was the seat of royal authority.

3. *La Poste d'Akansas – Henri de Tonty's administrative hamlet*

When La Salle claimed the lands of the Mississippi valley for France, he cannily dubbed them “*la Louisiane*” –or, anglicized, “Louisiana.” Louisiana did not exist as a separate province or colony at first, but the Arkansas Post provided an administrative center for this far-off corner of New France until the founding of Nouvelle Orléans in 1718.

In 1720 or 1721, the French crown divided *la Louisiane* into nine administrative districts; Arkansas was one of these. In 1722, however, a reorganization lumped lands north of the Arkansas River into the district of Illinois, administered from Fort de Chartres. An Arkansas royal commandant and judge remained at Arkansas Post, but was in some matters inferior to the governor at Fort de Chartres, who in turn answered to the governor at Nouvelle Orleans. All clear?

4. *New Orleans: capital-come-lately*

In 1718, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville established Nouvelle Orleans on a crescent-shaped flat of land by the Mississippi, about 100 miles from the river’s mouth into the Gulf of Mexico. While a French colony, Louisiana was governed alternately by the crown and by several chartered proprietors, who contracted with the crown for administration of the colony and a trade monopoly in exchange for settlers and slaves to supply the colony with goods. Antoine Crozat was Louisiana's first proprietor of Louisiana from 1712 until 1717, when he resigned and the crown turned the colony over to John Law, who created the corporation called the Company of the Indies in 1719 to govern Louisiana. Beset by failed crops, Indian wars, slave insurrections, and financial disaster, the Company of the Indies returned the colony back to the crown of France, who administered it until 1763, when it turned Louisiana over to Spain. During this time of Royal rule, the “capital” of Louisiana could properly be said to have been Paris or the Palace of Versailles, but New Orleans was the effective administrative center for the province—a condition which continued through the Spanish interlude.

5. *St. Louis - the seat of government, Missouri-style-*

In 1804, the Federal government organized much of the Louisiana Purchase lands into the Districts of Orleans (New Orleans and its environs) and the up-river District of Louisiana, which was soon sub-divided into five subsidiary districts. This included the area that would become Arkansas. St. Louis was designated the capital. In march 1805, the Districts were re-designated Territories. When, in 1812, the Territory of Orleans was admitted to the Union as the state of Louisiana, the former Louisiana territory was renamed “Missouri.” St. Louis remained the capital until 1821, when the seat of government was removed to St. Charles, pending a final relocation to the City of Jefferson.

In 1806, the district of Arkansas was created within the territory of Louisiana, out of the southern part of the previously created New Madrid district. After the territory was renamed Missouri, a presidential order created a judgeship for Arkansas Post and required that the judges of Missouri Territory hold two sessions each year at Arkansas Post.

6. *Arkansas Post (again) – once was not enough*

In 1818, as sentiment for statehood grew in Missouri, meetings were held in the District of Arkansas to discuss formation of a discrete territory. On March 2 1819, the same day as Missouri's admission to the Union, the Territory of Arkansas was created. the Organic Act specified that "the seat of government shall be the Post of Arkansas, on the Arkansaw River." On March 3, President Monroe appointed territorial officers including James "I'll try, sir" Miller of New Hampshire, who would serve as Arkansas's first governor. On Sunday, December 26, Miller's keelboat, complete with a flag bearing his famed words uttered in battle at Lundy's Lane, arrived at Arkansas Post.

The Arkansas Assembly was convened by Governor James Miller in February 1820. During its first session, it met in two rented rooms in James Montgomery's tavern, in the heart of the hamlet. The tavern was a frame structure roughly 50 feet long by 32 feet wide, with galleries on the sides. It boasted four rooms, six doors & eight windows, a notable edifice for the old village. For the hire of two of these rooms, plus sundries furnished the General Assembly, Montgomery was to be paid "a sum not exceeding thirty seven dollars."

7. *Cadron, no, Crystal Hill, no...Little Rock! – I'll try, sir, to get this straight.*

Soon after the organization of territorial government at Arkansas Post, a search began to find a more suitable seat, more central within the territory and less prone to flooding, alligators and malaria. Governor Miller favored locating the capital either near the Cadron settlement (near present-day Conway) or at Pyeattstown on Crystal Hill, west of present-day Maumelle, where he purchased land and built a modest plantation. The most viable choice, however, was the Little Rock settlement, located where the government road to the Red River crossed the Arkansas. After episodes of legal chicanery involving overlapping land claims, as well as a duel, house-rustling and some debate, the Assembly opted in October 1820 to remove the seat of government to Little Rock as of June 1, 1821. And there it has stayed, sort of. One of the early promoters of moving the capital to Little Rock provided space for the assembly to meet; they stayed in local taverns, inns and lodgings including, probably, the Hinderleiter tavern or "grog shop" which was once touted as having served as territorial capitol. Soon after, a small two-room frame building was erected between Main and Scott Streets, south of Elizabeth (present-day 5th Street), which would house the Assembly during its sessions.

In 1833, work began on what was termed the territorial courthouse. The building was commissioned by Territorial Governor and Kentucky native John Pope, who chose Kentucky architect Gideon Shryock (who had previously designed the Kentucky state capitol building) to create plans for the Arkansas edifice. Shryock chose the Greek Revival style, then a popular design for public buildings, but the original plans were deemed too grand and expensive for the young territory's scant treasury. Consequently, the plans were changed by George Weigart, Shryock's assistant, who oversaw construction at the Little Rock site.

In 1836, Arkansas became the 25th state; it was admitted along with Michigan under the provisions of the Missouri Compromise. When Arkansas became a state, government officials moved into the new building, despite ongoing construction. In fact, Arkansas legislators threatened workers with bodily harm because of construction noise during the first legislative session to meet there. The building was declared complete in 1842; it served in this capacity

until 1911, when Governor George Donaghey spurred the migration of state government into the larger-but-at-that-time-yet-unfinished Capitol building.

7½. ***Washington: The Seat of the Secessionists***

During the War Between The States (or The American Civil War), Arkansas enjoyed the dubious distinction of having two capital cities. At the outbreak of war, Arkansas was slow to join the secession movement but on May 6 1861 an ordinance of secession was adopted by a special convention assembled in Little Rock. Little Rock remained the capital of Confederate Arkansas until September 10, 1863, when Union forces under the command of General Fred Steele occupied Little Rock. Steele's column found the state government gone; Governor Flanagin had ordered all state records to be conveyed to Washington, in Hempstead County. From there, the Flanagin administration sought to carry on its business and the Supreme Court met. Meanwhile, the Union authorities administered Arkansas from Little Rock; at the end of the war, that city became the undisputed capital of Arkansas once more.